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FAUNISTIC NOTE

Confirmation of the presence of steppe polecat *Mustela eversmanii* (Carnivora: Mustelidae) in Giurgiu County (Romania) after more than 5 decades

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Abstract

This paper confirms the presence of steppe polecat *Mustela eversmanii* in Giurgiu County after more than 50 years. *Mustela eversmanii* is considered a vulnerable species, being listed in Annexes II and IV of the Habitats Directive. The specimen was found within the Site of Community Importance - ROSCI0043 Comana, included in the Natura 2000 network, which significantly overlaps with the protected natural area (Comana Natural Park). Currently, the steppe polecat is not added to the list of the Standard Form, because its presence was uncertain. We consider that this discovery is valuable and has important implications for the conservation of the species.

Keywords

Geographical distribution, mammals, new record, Romania.

Mustela eversmanii (Lesson, 1827) is a mustelid species typical of steppe lands and arid plains, but records suggest that it can also be found in neighboring habitats to agricultural land (Wolsan 1993; Šálek et al. 2013).

It is a nocturnal predator, coexisting locally with the European polecat, *Mustela putorius* (Linnaeus, 1758). The occupation of the habitat is closely related to the

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presence of the European ground squirrel, *Spermophilus citellus* (Linnaeus, 1766), the common hamster, *Cricetus cricetus* (Linnaeus, 1758), but also to other rodents, which represent the main food source for it (Ognev 1962; Šálek et al. 2013; Cserkész et al. 2020).

Currently, the distribution of the steppe polecat on Romania's territory is considered unknown for the most of its surface. This is mainly due to the lack of attention paid to research on mustelid species. There is a close phenotypic resemblance between *Mustela putorius* and *Mustela eversmanii*, the two carnivorous species being often difficult to distinguish, and this difficulty in correctly identifying the species could contribute to the unknown status of the steppe inhabitant (Hegyeli 2009; Šálek et al. 2013).

The steppe polecat was first mentioned as being present on the territory of Romania by Călinescu (1929). Most observations of the presence of the species were made mainly in the southeastern part of the country (Călinescu 1930; Călinescu 1932), more precisely in Dobruja region, in localities of Tulcea and Constanța counties (Botnariuc and Tatole 2005).

Data from older papers indicate that the species is also present outside Dobruja. In 1962, the steppe polecat was reported from Gălbinași hunting ground in Călărași County (in the past, Ilfov County) (Nania 1991). After 4 years, an adult female polecat was captured in the Albele Forest in Giurgiu County (Fig. 1) (Barbu and Barbu 1968; Nania 1991), and in 1967, in the same area, a second specimen was captured, this time a male (Nania 1991). At the same time, there is information about the distribution of *M. eversmanii* in the southern region of Oltenia (Almășan 1962), but the older data from the previously mentioned writings were ignored, not being cited in the literature – see Chapter Mammalia in the Red Book of Vertebrates in Romania (Botnariuc and Tatole 2005).

Current data have confirmed that the distribution of the steppe polecat in Romania is much wider, being reported in the northeast part of the country (Moldavia) (Šálek et al. 2013; Ion et al. 2015), as well as in the western region (Banat and Crișana) (Hegyeli 2009).

There were no definite reports published from Giurgiu County. The roadkill specimen, a *Mustela eversmanii* (Fig. 2) was found in November 2020, on DJ411, at the exit from Brăniștari (44°10'53" N; 26°03'56" E), a locality within Comana Natural Park, Giurgiu County, Romania.

It was a subadult female with head and body length (HB): 330 mm, tail length (T): 120 mm, hind foot length (HF): 48 mm, ear length (E): 24 mm and weight (W): 640 g. The yellowish-white color of the fur, both on the back and sides, and on the abdomen, with the tips of the hairs brown-blackish, helped to correctly identify the species, thus differentiating between the European polecat whose fur is brown on the back, going black on the abdomen. It could also be seen that the specimen had winter fur, hence its relatively bushy tail.

The found specimen was at a distance of about 22 km from the two specimens that were reported in the past in Giurgiu County (in Albele Forest). The specimen is

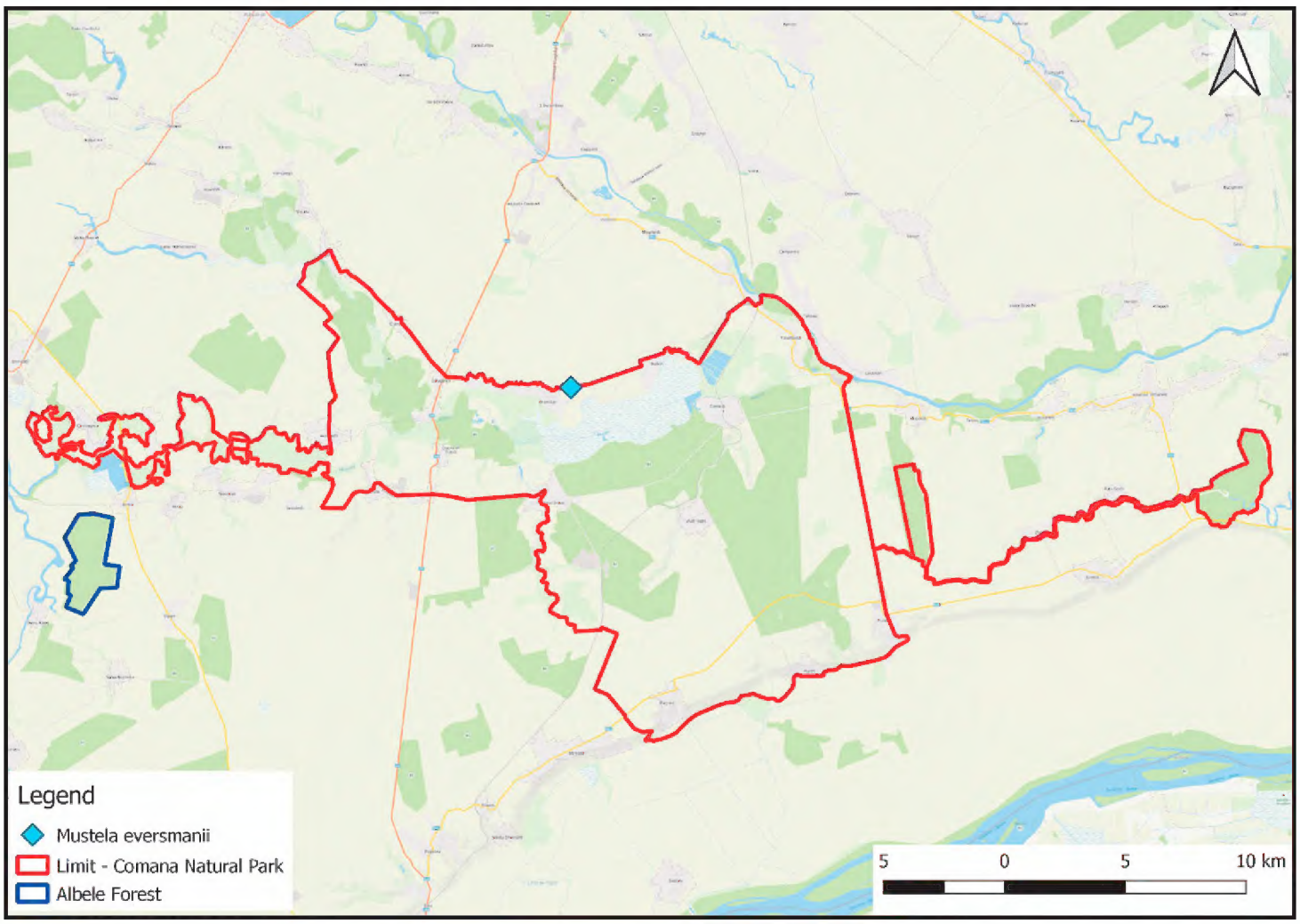

Figure 1. The occurrence of *Mustela eversmanii* in Albele Forest (1966) and Brănișțari (2020), Giurgiu County, Romania.

Figure 2. The steppe polecat (*Mustela eversmanii*) specimen found in Comana Natural Park (Brănișțari, Giurgiu)

now registered in the Mammals Collection of the „Grigore Antipa" National Museum of Natural History, Bucharest, Romania, with inventory number MAM13328.

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